

Prepared Testimony by Urbino “Benny” Martinez

Brooks County Sheriff, Falfurrias Texas

Joint Subcommittee on Health and Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Hearing

“President Biden’s Border Crisis is a Public Health Crisis”

301 W Railroad Street, Building D, Weslaco, TX

February 15, 2023

Introduction

Chairwoman Rogers, Ranking Member Pallone, and all Subcommittee Members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee to discuss this very important issue.

My name is Benny Martinez. I’m the Brooks County Sheriff in South Texas. The Brooks County Sheriff’s Office, has five deputies and Command Staff, and is responsible for maintaining law and order within a rural region of **943** square miles that encompasses the county seat of Falfurrias. Outside of the city of Falfurrias, the county consists primarily of privately owned ranchland. The sandy terrain is mostly vegetated with mesquite trees, scrub oaks, and prickly pear cactus. The county’s total population is about **7400**.

Background

Brooks County has the largest U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint in the Nation. Known as the Falfurrias checkpoint, it is approximately 70 miles north of the U.S/Mexico border on U.S. Highway 281. U.S. Highway 281 is a major north/south artery from the Rio Grande Valley area that leads to Houston, San Antonio, Austin and Dallas and other destinations throughout the interior of the United States.

United States Highway 281 is part of the Gulf Coast corridor, which is one of the most active drug and human smuggling corridors in the United States. The Falfurrias checkpoint is one of the busiest checkpoints in the southwest corridor in regards to undocumented crosser apprehensions and narcotic seizures.

Because of Brooks County’s geographical location and the Falfurrias checkpoint, it has its own very unique challenges. In most cases, smugglers/coyotes drop off undocumented crossers. They are led by the smugglers and made to walk east and west of United States Highway 281, moving north through private ranch lands, to then get picked up on Texas Highway 285 and other roads by other smugglers who will then transport them on the Gulf Coast corridor to cities north. In other cases, local gang members or others seeking financial gain, who live in the county, drive their human and drug loads through private property by cutting locks and fences, causing untold private property damage.

The sad reality is that many of those who are being led through the brush by the smugglers do not survive their demanding journey. Since 2009, the county has recovered **929** bodies of undocumented crossers, that includes **119** in 2021 and **90** in 2022. We estimate that we recover less than half of all those who perish. Since 2009, the cost to the county of dealing with those who have perished has totaled to almost **\$1,000,000**.

In addition, the Brooks County emergency services are greatly impacted. Ambulances are being pulled from day-to-day operations to answer calls in remote areas where turnaround time is roughly 4 to 5 hours, leaving our constituents without emergency medical services. This has put a strain on the local health system.

Last year (2022) there were **115** EMS calls for the undocumented, and **3** deaths in route to hospital.

Fire related to immigration in Brooks County consisted of **36,208** burned acres, which cost the county **\$75,000** to our fire department in fuel, breakdowns, equipment, and other related costs.

The cost to only one of the areas heli-vac services was **\$320,000** in 2022, with only **\$45,000** being reimbursed. The two area hospitals used for undocumented services wrote off thousands of dollars for direct cost of unpaid services, further burdening small rural hospitals.

The Falfurrias Border Patrol Station reported that in 2022 there was a **100%** increase in firearm seizures from 2021; a **400%** increase in checkpoint vehicle circumventions; a **150%** increase in cocaine; **1,743%** increase in meth; **175%** increase in gang members; **67%** increase sexual offenders; and a **222%** increase in alien smuggling cases.

On a national level, in 2022, there were **2.2** million encounters from **171** countries. In the current FY 23 there have been **775,000** encounters, with **3,000** of those having serious criminal history with national security and public safety concerns. There have been **1.2** million got-a-ways reported. We have no idea if they're Cartel, other criminals, or terrorist, because the Federal Government has failed to enforce border security efforts and Border Patrol's time has been taken up processing the majority of migrants giving themselves up at the border.

From March – October 2022, the Texas Operation Lone Star Coalition, of which Brooks County is a part of, has reported **322** smuggling pursuits, **204** bailouts, recovered **181** stolen vehicles, seized **31** firearms, seized **\$591,000** going back to Mexico, recorded **\$286,000** of property damage, and have charged **179** people for engaging in organized criminal activity.

In the past 31 days of 2023, there have been **1,937** Mexican Cartel drone's incursions in three South Texas border counties.

The Falfurrias Border Patrol was using two Aerostats that flew just south of Falfurrias, and that were providing great situational awareness of foot and vehicle traffic. The funding for the Aerostat program (which included 14 Aerostats) was recently removed against Border Patrols requests.

The National Sheriffs' Association recently called for the eradication of Drug Cartels, starting with the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartels. Their February 9, 2023 press release read in part:

“The Mexican drug cartels, as well-documented in the successful prosecution of Joaquin Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo, operate sophisticated crime operations fueled by fear, terror, intimidation, extortion, and murder. These criminal organizations are directly responsible for the increases in deaths, human trafficking, sex trafficking, and unprecedented violence occurring in cities and counties across our nation. These cartels and their operatives are operating with disastrous effects not just on our southern border, but their influence can also be felt across our northern border and maritime borders as they seek to exploit all avenues to deliver lethal narcotics and violent criminals into our communities.”

The border crisis is the result of not securing the border. When there are no consequences for unlawfully entering the United States, and DHS does not adjudicate asylum cases in a timely manner and remove those who don't have valid claims, transnational criminal organizations will continue to be able to recruit migrants to come up here and overwhelm Border Patrol resources while they run narcotics and criminals around the back end.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to thank you for bringing attention to this very important topic and I look forward to any questions you have.